

A spirited battle between Jesus and Satan...

- Pagan government
- False religion

(iii) God's people are safe

Revelation 11:19–15:4 began by outlining a fierce and profound spiritual battle taking place between ‘the child’ (our Lord Jesus Christ) and ‘the dragon’ (Satan). Following this basic picture there are seven visions, each explaining further aspects to this spiritual conflict. (i) First, **Satan makes use of the beast from the sea** – pagan government^{□1}. (ii) Second, **Satan makes use of the beast from the land** – false religion co-operating with anti-Christian government^{□2}. Now in the third and fourth visions of this section^{□3} we are given an assurance that God's people are safe and Babylon is destined to fall.

□1 13:1-10
 □2 13:11-18
 □3 14: 1–5, 6–13

(iii) **God's people are safe.** The children of God are pictured as people who are in the company of the Lamb of God, upon Mount Zion^{□1}. *1 Then I looked and, behold, there was the Lamb standing on the mount Zion, and with him were 144,000 people, having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads.* The 144,000 is (as before) a symbol of the total company of God's people. It is twelve (recalling the twelve tribes of Israel) times twelve (recalling the twelve apostles) times a thousand (symbolizing a vast multitude). They are marked with the ‘name’ of the Lamb and of the Father. That is, they are unlike those who are identified with Satan and his allies (having the mark of the beast). Instead they identify themselves with the revelation of God's character (his name). And they are committed to ‘the Lamb’, the way of salvation that consists of the Lord Jesus Christ and the shedding of his blood.

□1 14:1-5

- They are a powerful and vast worship team!

They are a powerful and vast worship-team! *2 Also I heard a sound from heaven, like the sound of many waters, and like the noise of mighty thunder. The sound which I heard was like the sound of harp-players making music with their harps.* The redeemed are worshipping. Their worship is **steady and persistent** (for the many waters of the sea pounding on the seashore or of a waterfall are unbroken). The worship was **loud** (like thunder). And the worship was **musical** (like harp-playing). Above all the worshippers were worshipping because they had something to sing about. True worship flows out of the logic of what God has done for us. It is obvious and inevitable. Worship flows out of those who are gripped with the knowledge of the greatness of God. So John says: *3 Then they sang, as it were, a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000, the people who had been redeemed from the earth.* This does not mean no one could know the **words**. Since the song was loudly sung the words would be known as soon as they were sung! It is rather a way of saying that only the redeemed could sing the song with **reality**. The redeemed have something to sing about that no one else will truly appreciate.

- They are a pure and holy people

They are a pure and holy people. *4 These are they that were not defiled with women, for they are virgins.* Again this is symbolic language. The first half of the sentence is more appropriate to men; the second half is appropriate to women. It is an unusual and even illogical way of claiming purity. It does not refer to literal singleness.

- They are followers of Jesus

They are followers of Jesus. *These are people who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.* These phrases speak of utter obedience in the midst of persecution and temptation. *They were purchased from among other people to be the first-fruits for God and for the Lamb.* God's purpose in saving these people is that (like the first-fruits of ancient Israel) they should be unique and specially owned by God. Such is their calling and such is their reward.

- Their talk is honest

Their talk is honest. Verse 5 adds: *And in their mouth was found no lie: they are without blemish.* Their general lifestyle is not easily criticized.

Such people are safe with the Lamb on Mount Zion, the place where God dwells in his temple. The language is still symbolic.

(iv) Babylon is destined to fall soon

• The destruction of evil is part of the gospel

• Babylon – worldly indulgence, love of money and love of ease – is destined to fall

• The wine of God's anger

(iv) **Babylon is destined to fall soon.** A fourth vision tells of the coming judgement of God and the fall of a third ally of the dragon, Babylon^{□1}. John sees an angel flying in the sky. ⁶*Then I saw another angel flying in the middle of the sky. He had the everlasting gospel to announce to the people who live on earth, to every nation, tribe, language and people.* ⁷*He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come. Worship him who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and the springs of water.'* The angel is in the middle of the task of bringing severe judgement on Babylon but his announcement is called 'the everlasting gospel'. The destruction of evil is part of the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. The 'gospel' is good news of salvation; it is also good news concerning the abolition of evil. The fact that God is the Creator means that he has the power and the authority to act in destruction of everything that spoils his creation.

A second angel announces that Babylon has fallen. ⁸*Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. She made all the nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.'* 'Babylon' is worldly indulgence, love of money, love of ease, love of the sins of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the desire of the flesh and the pride of life. But John sees that this great ally of Satan is destined to fall. Worldly pleasure-seeking corrupts the entire world. God must eventually remove her.

A third angel speaks of punishment that comes upon those who identify themselves with 'the beast' (paganism and its persecuting habits). ⁹*Then another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a great voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead, or upon his hand, ¹⁰he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger.'* The sinner loved wine when he was ruled by 'Babylon'. Now he drinks the 'wine' of God's anger. In the ancient world wine was generally mixed with water. Only the drunkards drank wine undiluted, but the wine of God's anger will finally be undiluted.

Punishment

(i) Is painful torment

(ii) Is unbroken torment

(iii) Unmerciful suffering

(iv) In the Lamb's presence

(v) Followed by extinction

'And he or she will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb, ¹¹and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever. And those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name, have no rest day or night.' What exactly is the punishment? (i) It is **torment**. We must of course keep in mind that this is all picture-language. What is being tormented is an animal plus those who love the beast (in the picture-symbolism)! Yet the picture is of something terribly painful and distressing. Torment does indeed mean torment. It cannot be reduced to some kind of metaphor for regret. (ii) It is **unbroken** torment. There is no 'time-off' while the punishment is continuing. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, thought it possible that the inhabitants of hell might get a break on Sundays! But no! It is unbroken suffering while it lasts. (iii) It is **unmerciful** suffering, suffering without dilution, without any mixture that makes it weaker. (iv) It takes place in the presence of the Lamb. The Lamb approves of justice being executed. (v) It is suffering followed by extinction. There are several indications that this is what is taught here. The picture language is taken from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Fire and sulphur destroyed the wicked cities. They were exterminated, and so were removed from the earthly scenery. In Genesis, after the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, the **next** day Abraham sees **only** ascending smoke. The city had disappeared. The smoke was the sign of what **had** happened. The fire did its work one day, and the cities were gone the next day. The sulphurous fire was a furnace, an incinerator^{□1}. It did a work of **exterminating** evil. 2 Thessalonians 1:9 fits in with this exposition: 'They will pay the penalty of eternal destruction so as to be separated from the presence of the Lord, separated from the glory of his might . . .' God's judgement has steps and stages in it. Hell has a sequence of events. At one point the wicked will be 'tormented with fire . . . in the presence of the Lamb'^{□2}, but the sinner does not stay 'in the presence of the Lamb' for ever. Another stage is the penalty of 'eternal destruction so as to be separated from the presence of the Lord'. We

God's judgement has stages

• Torment

□1 14:6-13

□1 see Genesis 19:28

□2 14:10

- Separation
- Eternal destruction

must not think that sin and suffering and Satan are as everlasting as God and joy and heaven and praise. 'Eternal punishment' does not mean that sin and Satan and wickedness continue for ever (yet no orthodox Christian believes the wicked repent in hell). The idea (taught by Augustine) that there will be two kingdoms, equally eternal, alongside one another – the kingdom of wickedness and the kingdom of bliss – is a mistake. Eventually there are not two kingdoms but one kingdom! Only one kingdom is allowed to endure for ever.

The perseverance of the saints

- Even martyrdom need not terrify us

The revelation continues: ¹²*Here is the perseverance of the saints. Here are those who hold firm to the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.* It reminds us of Revelation 13:10 (where the danger of suffering calls for perseverance) and 13:18 (where the mystery of the beast calls for wisdom). Here the point seems to be: the threat of suffering punishment with the beast is so terrible that it calls for us to persevere in obedience to God's commands and in trust in the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ (the former being the **end** and the latter being the **means** to the end). If we persevere in this way, even martyrdom need not terrify us. ¹³*Then I heard the voice from heaven saying, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from that point onward.'* The phrase 'from now on' (as the Greek has it) means 'from now – at the point of death – onwards'.^a Death is the introduction into immediate reward (as Philippians 1:21, Luke 16:22 and, I would argue, 2 Corinthians 5:1 imply^b).

- The Holy Spirit convinces
- Entering into rest – before death and finally at death

The Holy Spirit convinces John that the revelation from heaven is true. 'Yes,' says the Spirit. 'Let them enjoy^c rest as a result of their laborious troubles, for their works follow along with them.' When punished the wicked have no rest (for they share the restlessness which is the fate of the beast^{□1}). But the righteous enter into rest. Like God in Genesis 2:1–3 they cease from their labours and enjoy the **fruit** of what they have done. 'Entering into rest' can in some form be experienced even before death (which is the point of Hebrews 3–4) but passing into glory is the greatest form of experiencing the reward of God for all that has been done for him. In this life there may be a provisional 'entering into rest'. In death there is a final 'entering into rest'. The toils and troubles that have been endured for Jesus' sake follow along with the believer when he or she dies. Jesus says 'Well done' and the believer enjoys the jubilant restfulness of God's rewards.

□1 14:11

Notes

- a. Another possibility is that *ap' arti* should be read as one word *aparti* ('surely'). See D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1998), p. 788, for the complicated textual issues involved. For the moment I follow readings of the Greek texts published by UBS and Stuttgart Bible Society.
- b. See also my exposition of Revelation 20:4–6 in chapter 61.
- c. I suggest that the *hina* here has an imperatival force.

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